Sudanese city 'living in fear' as paramilitary threat looms

PORT SUDAN: Residents of southern Sudan's El-Obeid have said they are living in fear as paramilitaries appear to position themselves for an assault, with the army reporting intercepting an RSF drone attack on the city on Saturday.

The North Kordofan state capital and regional hub lies roughly 400 kilometres (250 miles) southwest of the capital Khartoum, and would be a strategic prize for the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), at war with Sudan's army since April 2023.

On Thursday, the RSF said it had accepted a truce proposal put forward by mediators, but the UN subsequently said it saw "no sign of de-escalation" and warned of more fighting to come.

"We are especially worried after what happened in El-Fasher," Soaad Ali, from El-Obeid's Karima neighbourhood, said, referring to the RSF's capture of the last army stronghold in western Darfur.

That takeover was followed by reports of mass killings, sexual violence, abductions, and looting, triggering international condemnation and fears that the conflict was shifting into the oil-rich Kordofan region.

El-Obeid, which hosts an airport, sits on a key supply route linking Darfur and Khartoum.

The UN reported that 40 people were killed in the city on Monday in an attack on a funeral.

And last week, the RSF captured the town of Bara, north of El-Obeid, prompting more than 36,000 people to flee the town and four others in North Kordofan over six days, according to the UN.

"We are living in fear," said a resident of El-Obeid's Qubba neighbourhood, who asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.

"Officials try to reassure us, but... after what happened in Bara, our fears are growing." The day after the RSF announced it supported mediators' truce proposal, the UN warned of "preparations for intensified hostilities" in Sudan.

The body's rights chief Volker Turk, in particular, issued "a stark warning about events unfolding in Kordofan".—AFP

LONDON: Susan Langley, the new Lady Mayor of the British capital, waves from her coach as she passes through the streets on her way to pledge allegiance to the Crown. The Lord Mayor's procession is a throwback to the first journey to Westminster 800 years ago. London has a Lady Lord Mayor for the first time in its history.—AFP

Hungary gets reprieve from Russia oil sanctions

WASHINGTON: US President Donald Trump handed Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban a one-year exemption from sanctions for buying Russian oil and gas after the close right-wing allies held a chummy White House meeting on Friday.

Trump slapped sanctions on Moscow's two largest oil companies last month after losing patience with Russian President Vladimir Putin over his refusal to end the nearly four-year-old invasion of Ukraine.

But while Trump has pushed other European countries to stop buying oil that he says funds Moscow's "war machine", Orban used his first trip to the White House since Trump's return to power to push for special treatment.

As they heaped praise on each other, Trump said he was considering an exemption because landlocked Hungary had to rely on pipelines that made it dependent on Russian oil and gas.

"As you know they don't have the advantage of having sea," Trump told reporters.

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said after the meeting that Washington had granted a "full and unlimited exemption from sanctions on oil and gas". But a White House official said Hungary's exemption was only for one year.

Hungary had committed to purchasing US liquefied natural gas worth around $600 million, the official said.

The Hungarian prime minister has maintained close ties with both Moscow and Washington, while often bucking the rest of the EU on pressuring Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

Orban offered to host a summit in Budapest between Trump and Putin, although the US leader called it off last month and hit Moscow with sanctions for the first time in his presidency.

At the White House, Orban pressed his case that Russian energy was vital for Hungary. "Pipeline is not an ideological or political issue. It's a physical reality because we don't have ports," Orban said.

Washington has given firms who work with Russian oil giants Rosneft and Lukoil one month to cut ties or face secondary sanctions, which would deny them access to US banks, traders, shippers and insurers.

Orban also said it would take a "miracle" for Ukraine to beat Moscow, underscoring the gulf between him and other European leaders on the war.

Trump wholeheartedly backed Orban on the touchstone issue of migration, saying that the Hungary's European Union counterparts should show him more respect.

Orban has long thumbed his nose at the EU over migration. He has also refused to send military aid to Ukraine and opposes Kyiv's EU bid, and has had frequent run-ins with Brussels on the rule of law and other issues.—AFP

Co-discoverer of DNA's double helix dies at 97

NEW YORK: James D. Watson, the brilliant but controversial American biologist whose 1953 discovery of the structure of DNA, the molecule of heredity, ushered in the age of genetics and provided the foundation for the biotechnology revolution of the late 20th century, has died at the age of 97.

The *New York Times* reported that Watson died this week at a hospice on Long Island.

In his later years, Watson's reputation was tarnished by comments on genetics and race that led him to be ostracised by the scientific establishment.

Even as a younger man, he was known as much for his writing and for his enfant-terrible persona, including his willingness to use another scientist's data to advance his own career, as for his science.

His 1968 memoir, *The Double Helix*, was a racy, take-no-prisoners account of how he and British physicist Francis Crick were first to determine the three-dimensional shape of DNA. The achievement won the duo a share of the 1962 Nobel Prize in medicine and eventually would lead to genetic engineering, gene therapy and other DNA-based medicine and technology.

Crick complained that the book "grossly invaded my privacy" and another colleague, Maurice Wilkins, objected to what he called a "distorted and unfavourable image of scientists" as ambitious schemers willing to deceive colleagues and competitors in order to make a discovery.

In addition, Watson and Crick, who did their research at Cambridge University in England, were widely criticised for using raw data collected by X-ray crystallographer Rosalind Franklin to construct their model of DNA, as two intertwined staircases, without fully acknowledging her contribution.

In 2007, Watson again caused widespread anger when he told the *Times of London* that he believed testing indicated the intelligence of Africans was "not really ... the same as ours". Accused of promoting long-discredited racist theories, he was shortly afterwards forced to retire from his post as chancellor of New York's Cold Spring Harbour Laboratory.

Although he later apologised, he made similar comments in a 2019 documentary, calling different racial attainment on IQ tests, attributed by most scientists to environmental factors, "genetic".

James Dewey Watson was born in Chicago on April 6, 1928, and graduated from the University of Chicago in 1947 with a zoology degree. He received his doctorate from Indiana University, where he focused on genetics.

In 1951, he joined Cambridge's Cavendish Lab, where he met Crick and began the quest for the structural chemistry of DNA.

Just waiting to be found, the double helix opened the doors to the genetics revolution. In the structure Crick and Watson proposed, the steps of the winding staircase were made of pairs of chemicals called nucleotides or bases.—Reuters

Nationalist speakers spark controversy across Europe

VIENNA: As far-right parties have topped polls across Europe in recent years, nationalist politicians have taken the helm of four parliaments, stirring controversy.

Czech lawmakers elected the country's first-ever far-right parliament speaker this week, becoming the latest parliament in Europe to be headed by a nationalist and pro-Russian politician since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

One day after Tomio Okamura, who has called for an end to aid for Ukraine, was elected parliament speaker, he ordered removal of the Ukrainian flag from the building, where it had been hoisted in solidarity.

Austrian historians this week also urged the Alpine country's first far-right parliamentary speaker to call off a planned event on Nov 11 that "honours a declared antisemite", the late politician Franz Dinghofer, Austria's vice chancellor in the 1920s and a Nazi party member during World War II.

In Italy, Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, nationalist politicians have won the parliamentary presidency, joining Hungary, where Prime Minister Viktor Orban's party has held the post since 2010.

In all four countries, the change followed an agreement with other political parties, as the nationalists lacked an absolute majority.

And the elected parliament speakers were not from the same political party as the head of government, as is the case in Hungary.

According to Catherine Fieschi, a researcher at the Robert Schuman Centre at the European University Institute of Florence, Orban "has paved the way" for the current trend.

Since Orban's return to power in 2010, he "has shown that it is possible to remain in the European Union" without respecting its treaties, she said.—AFP

Indonesian student faces probe over school explosions

JAKARTA: Indonesian authorities said on Saturday they were investigating a student over their alleged involvement in explosions that wounded nearly 100 people at a school in the capital Jakarta.

The blasts hit a school mosque in North Jakarta just as people were gathering for Friday prayers, sparking panic among worshippers.

The national police chief said investigators had gathered "several pieces of evidence" as part of their probe.

"There's writing, and there is also evidence of powder that could potentially have caused an explosion," Listyo Sigit Prabowo said in comments broadcast by *Kompas TV*.

Authorities so far have identified one suspect, a student who was wounded in the explosions, but Listyo did not rule out the involvement of others.

Investigators are also examining the suspect's family and social media, the police chief added. Ninety-six people were wounded in the incident, Listyo said, revising the police's earlier casualty figure of 54.

Twenty-nine victims remain hospitalised, including at least two in intensive care, he said.

Mayndra Eka Wardhana, spokesman for the counter-terrorism police unit Densus 88, said that investigators had searched the suspect's home.

He added that they were still probing the motive behind the incident.A witness said there was confusion over what happened.

"At first we thought it came from some electronic equipment, maybe the sound system... but it turned out the explosion came from under the prayer mat," Kinza Ghaisan Rayyan, a 17-year-old student, said on Friday.—AFP

EU naval force secures ship attacked off Somalia

NAIROBI: The European Union's anti-piracy naval force secured a ship on Friday that had been attacked off the coast of Somalia.

Armed assailants had attacked the vessel, run by Greek firm Latsco Marine Management, as it was travelling to South Africa from India on Thursday with 24 crew members aboard.

The Horn of Africa country was once notorious for its pirate raids and ransom attacks, but incidents have become less frequent.

The pirates abandoned the merchant tanker after an "early show of force", an EU Naval Force statement said.

"The crew, composed of 24 people, is safe and no injuries have been reported." An intense search for the pirates, who are believed to still be in the area, is underway, the naval force said, adding that they will be legally prosecuted if captured.

The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations Centre earlier said the boat, the Hellas Aphrodite, was approached from the stern by a small vessel.

There was no security on board at the time of the attack, according to maritime news agency Lloyd's List.—AFP

Supreme no more

Continued from Page 1

executive and legislative overreach.

Any aggrieved citizen can call an action of state in question by invoking Article 199 of the Constitution. That jurisdiction will survive. Such cases will, however, be heard now by the constitutional benches of the high courts.

In the past, the chief justice of the respective high court assigned these cases.

With the 26th Amendment, this authority has been transferred to the Judicial Commission of Pakistan (JCP), where the chief justice of Pakistan and other judges are in a minority.

The state whose actions are under scrutiny in such matters is ascendant.

Every experienced lawyer knows that a party with the authority to control the assignment of cases can also control outcomes.

Judges, like the rest of us, have their preferences and prejudices. Baser motives are not needed. When the desired outcome of a case is matched with the inclinations of a judge, success is almost assured.

Any miscalculation in assessing human predilections is ringfenced by keeping the sword of transfer in full view of any judge, who may entertain adventurous ideas.

The president of the country will have the authority to transfer a judge of one high court to another. They can be exiled from a city or an area, where they have spent a lifetime, to another high court in another province.

They will have no say in the matter. To the contrary, a judge, who does not accept such a transfer will be deemed retired.

The powerful dissent of SC's Justice Naeem Akhtar Afghan in the Islamabad High Court judges' case ought to have made us pause and reflect on the deleterious consequences of such transfers for judicial independence.

Instead, we have swung full throttled in the opposite direction. Even the judges of the SC will no longer be immune from such actions.

The judges of the Federal Constitutional Court (FCC) will be appointed from lawyers or from judges of the SC.

Any SC judge, who refuses to accept this appointment, will be deemed retired.

Do not be surprised if you soon witness a purge of "undesirable" SC judges.

In matters of transfer, the SC will at least be at par with the high courts. In other respects, it will fare worse.

It will not be left with any authority to hear any appeals in constitutional cases from the high courts.

That authority will belong to the FCC. So will the jurisdiction to decide disputes between provinces, or between one or more provinces and the Federation, to adjudicate petitions for the enforcement of fundamental rights, and to advise the president on questions of constitutional law. All such matters presently pending in the SC will stand transferred to the FCC.

Appeals, under various statutes, will be diverted to the FCC by making an amendment to them.

It is apparent that the Elections Act, 2017 and other such statutes will soon be modified to effect this change.

All election disputes will soon fall into the FCC's lap. If a substantial question of constitutional law, by some quirk of fate or lawyer's ingenuity gets raised in any case before any court, the FCC will have the authority to sweep all such matters into its domain.

With one stroke of pen, the almost century old law of precedent will be erased. The FCC will not be bound by a judgment of the SC. All courts, including the SC, will be bound by the judgement of the FCC. That settles any lingering doubt about which of the two courts is higher.

Where does this leave the SC? It will not be the highest court in the land anymore. It will be restricted to hearing appeals in civil and criminal matters just like the district and sessions courts.

Nothing of any consequence on the national and constitutional plane will remain in its domain.

For all effects and purposes, it will be reduced to the 'Supreme District and Sessions Court'.

What General Ziaul Haq may have dreamt of, and what General Pervez Musharraf could not achieve, will soon be an accomplished fact.

This amendment, when carried, will give a lie to all those who have protested the ineffectiveness of our "elected" representatives and the inability of our parliament to change things. As demolition jobs go, this one is inimitable.

For nothing now can ever come to any good
— (Funeral Blues) W.H. Auden

The writer is a distinguished lawyer

Former Spanish king's memoirs stir debate over Franco

MADRID: The release of exiled former Spanish King Juan Carlos's memoirs has sparked renewed debate in Spain over his legacy and ties to the late dictator General Francisco Franco.

Its publication coincides with the 50th anniversary of Franco's death on November 20, 1975, and the commemoration of Juan Carlos's proclamation as king two days later.

In the book, the 87-year-old former monarch reflects on his role in Spain's transition to democracy, his strained family relationships, and the "mistake" of accepting millions of euros from Saudi Arabia.

The 500-page biography, "Reconciliation", co-written with French author Laurence Debray, was published in French on Wednesday and is set for a Spanish release on December 3.

Among the book's most controversial passages are Juan Carlos's warm words for the dictator Franco, who ruled Spain after his forces won the country's devastating 1936-39 civil war.

The former king wrote that he had "great respect" for Franco, who brought him to Spain from exile aged 10 to be raised as his successor. He said the general "could even be somewhat tender and benevolent".

"I appreciated his intelligence and his political acumen. I never allowed anyone to criticise him in front of me," he added.

Culture Minister Ernest Urtasun condemned the remarks on Thursday, calling it "sickening that nowadays someone would still dare to defend or justify the dictator".

'Own interpretation'

Juan Carlos is widely credited with guiding Spain toward democracy after the dictator's death in 1975.

He disappointed Francoists by supporting a parliamentary system within a constitutional monarchy.

Urtasun, of the far-left party Sumar, which opposes the monarchy, argued that democracy was achieved by "thousands of anti-Franco fighters who risked everything, who suffered torture, who endured imprisonment".

Former Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero also weighed in, saying Juan Carlos should have "tempered his words" about Franco, whose regime relied on executions, imprisonments of political opponents, and strict state censorship.

Juan Carlos, who has lived in self-imposed exile in the United Arab Emirates since 2020, is not scheduled to attend official events on November 21, marking the 50th anniversary of his proclamation as king the following day.

The royal household said this was consistent with his decision to step back from official duties — a move taken five years after he abdicated in 2014 in favour of his son, King Felipe VI. It declined to comment on the memoirs.

'Sugar-coated biography'

David San Narciso Martin, a contemporary history professor at Madrid's Complutense University, said the memoirs' release appeared timed to give Juan Carlos "a voice" in the commemorations and allow him to provide "his own interpretation of his reign".

"The image he presents of Franco is quite unique," Martin said.

Martin believed that the king was mistaken to suggest in his memoirs that Franco had anticipated he would bring democracy to Spain.

"Memory is always fragmented, and working with it can be risky, because every act of remembering is, in some way, an act of reinvention," the historian said.

Public opinion turned sharply against Juan Carlos in 2012, after it was revealed that he had gone on an extravagant elephant-hunting trip in Botswana as Spaniards suffered at the height of their financial and economic crisis.

While Juan Carlos acknowledges personal missteps, including financial scandals and extramarital affairs, critics say the memoir is largely an effort at image rehabilitation.

Author Luz Sanchez-Mellado called the book a "sugar-coated biography" in daily El Pais, writing that it depicts a monarch "so used to his every wish being law... he can't fathom that no one obeys him anymore." Despite being available only for pre-sale in Spanish, the memoir is the top-selling non-fiction book at Spanish bookshop chain Casa del Libro.

Juan Carlos wrote in the book that he finally agreed to publish his memoirs, despite his father having warned him never to do so, because his story "was being stolen from me".—AFP